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Shaw's Backside: The Other Side of an Icon

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Shaw's Backside: The Other Side of an Icon

Abstract

This week I find myself in Boston, one of the couple of American cities which call themselves the cradle of liberty. But I'm not drawn like a moth to the Revolution. It's just not my bean.

Instead, I find myself in the awkward position of standing at a visitor desk and asking a park ranger what will interest a Civil War geek in a Revolutionary-bent city. That dog don't hunt so well. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Robert Gould Shaw, 54th Massachusetts, Boston

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Shaw's Backside: The Other Side of an Icon

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2013

This week I find myself in Boston, one of the couple of American cities which call themselves the cradle of liberty. But I'm not drawn like a moth to the Revolution. It's just not my bean.

Instead, I find myself in the awkward position of standing at a visitor desk and asking a park ranger what will interest a Civil War geek in a Revolutionary-bent city. That dog don't hunt so well.

The Shaw Monument was the ranger's only suggestion. The Shaw Monument was already on my list. So the Shaw Monument it was.



Augustus Saint-Gaudens crafted an amazing piece of art to sit along the edge of Boston Common. Standing in awe staring at the bronze, the 54th Massachusetts came to vivid life as I stood in the waning hours of Sunday evening. I found amazing power in the words at the base of the monument, so much so I needed to trumpet them on Facebook: "Forward as fits a man, but the high soul burns on to light men's feet." That's art.

But somehow, I missed the fact that there is a backside to that bronze statue. Shaw and his soldiers have more to say through their marble resting place.

Every photo I see are those faces, those men, those chiseled jaws and striking brows marching into unknown death and destruction, but also winning freedom. I'd never seen the back of the monument.

The White Officers

taking life and honor in their hands cast in their lot with men of a despised race unproven in war and risked death as inciters of servile insurrection if taken prisoners besides encountering all the common perils of camp march and battle.

The Black rank and file
volunteered when disaster clouded the Union Cause. Served
without pay for eighteen months till given that of white troops.
Faced threatened enslavement if captured. Were brave in action.
Patient under heavy and dangerous labors and cheerful amid
hardships and privations.

Together
they gave to the Nation and the World undying proof that
Americans of African descent possess the pride, courage and
devotion of the patriot soldier. One hundred and eighty thousand
such Americans enlisted under the Union Flag in
MDCCCLXIII-MDCCCLXV.

The text was written by Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard in the years following the war. It is a powerful epitaph to the regiment made famous in our age by the film *Glory* and the rising neo-emancipation interpretation of the war. But it is not simply that. It works as an epitaph to the war itself, as a description of what the whole affair meant.

An imperfect partnership, inherently unequal yet striving toward equality, of white men and black men. Here, in this memorial to a war many have eschewed and subverted, ignored or swept under the rug, the two are offered a balanced set of praise.

The consequences are balanced as well. White officers and black soldiers risked not only their lives, they risked their freedom. And together, they proved that black folks were deserving of freedom.

Lincoln took that proof to heart. The faith he had in those black soldiers, the fact that he respected their willingness to step up and fight for a nation which didn't see them fully as men, the thought that because they fought that nation *should* treat them like men ultimately got that tall man killed.

The bronze on the front of the Shaw Monument at Boston Common is striking and powerful. But so are the words on the back.